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ALBRIGHT, DONALD ALEXANDER. Night-song Sung for Me. (1975) Directed
by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 49

The five chapters here included constitute the beginning of a
novel and are the result of the directions my writing has pursued to
this date.

Alexander Albright

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

1975

Approved by

Thesis Advisor

NIGHT-SONG SUNG FOR ME
"

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of
the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina
at Greensboro,
by

Alexander Albright
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Committee Members

R. L. P. W. K.

Greensboro

1975

Approved by

Dec 18, 1975
Date of Acceptance by Committee

Fred C. C. C.
Thesis Adviser

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION

II. LITERATURE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of
the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina
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December 18, 1975

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. STRANGER.	1
II. CARMEN.	12
III. ROOMS	27
IV. A JOB	33
V. ANALYSIS.	41

recently begun to take that literally, as a game to play against the world. At first it was hard, especially when horns honked or tires screeched behind me; the surprise of my name being called on so empty a street so late at night had nearly overtaken me but I caught myself in time: turn back once and you may as well have been turning back all along.

So I stood in front of the vegetables and fruits, trying to figure if grapefruits were a better buy by the bag or individually, weighing the fact that the bag made it impossible to feel each one individually against the fact that the individual ones were pink, the bagged ones weren't, while simultaneously trying to remember which was better for me ('P' for pink-pear, or pretty good? seasonally speaking).

"Hey, Look! Man, didn't you hear me? Where you been?" It was the voice from out on the street, now vaguely familiar though I wasn't sure if the familiarity had merely come from his previous calling. I turned to face the scraggly man who approached, weaving through the tomatoes, potatoes and melons. "David," I thought, but decided to play it safe until I was sure. I smiled to let him know for sure that it was me, and waited for him to stop, wondering, if he offered his hand, whether

STRANGER

"Hey, Leslie!" Though the voice had called my name, I continued to walk and turned into the all-night grocery store. It had been so long since I'd seen anyone I knew, since before moving here, that I was sure the Leslie called was another. Still, I had been tempted to look back. But when I had moved I had also promised myself not to look back and had recently begun to take that literally, as a game to play against the world. At first it was hard, especially when horns honked or tires screeched behind me; the surprise of my name being called on so empty a street so late at night had nearly overtaken me but I caught myself in time: turn back once and you may as well have been turning back all along.

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"Hey, Leslie! Man, didn't you hear me? Where you been?" It was the voice from out on the street, now vaguely familiar though I wasn't sure if the familiarity had merely come from his previous calling. I turned to face the scraggly man who approached, weaving through the tomatoes, potatoes and melons. 'David,' I thought, but decided to play it safe until I was sure. I smiled to let him know for sure that it was me, and waited for him to stop, wondering, if he offered his hand, whether

to shake conventionally or in the now fashionable soul grip everyone seemed to be using. My fingers itched in anticipation, but as I began to raise my hand to meet his I saw he wasn't going to shake at all. Glad to be saved from deciding on a grasp, I nonchalantly tugged on my ear with my right hand that had, by this time, risen too high to inconspicuously drop. He startled me though, with a quick jab to my left shoulder that seemed a little harder than a friendly greeting. Had I done something to this person who I now knew wasn't David?

"What you doin in town?" He settled in for the conversation less than a yard from me, and stank of beer and stale cigarettes mixed with body sweat; he lit a Lark and offered the pack to me.

"Shopping," I answered as I shook my head.

That certainly wasn't the answer he expected, I concluded from the wild laughter that took hold of him. "Shopping? Man, you mean to tell me you come all this way to go shopping at the B&W All Night Maxi-Mart? You crazy as ever." And he jabbed me again.

Now I began to seriously wonder if he had the right Leslie, because I lived just eight blocks away and had never considered it that far before, though there was a mini-mart across the street from where I lived. But they never stocked fresh fruits or meats so I generally did most of my shopping at the B&W.

"Ah, it's not that far," I reassured him. "Just a few blocks."

"A few blocks? You don't mean you live here now, do you? That's outta sight. How long you been in town?"

"Three months or so, I guess. Do you live here?" Gradually he looked more and more familiar, his face more clearly focusing, though I worried that perhaps I was forcing a mistaken identity on him.

"Wow! I can't hardly believe that. You shoulda looked me up soon as you got here, Les. You been wasting time, not looking me up." It definitely seemed as though one of us had found a long lost friend, but his last comment left little room for a continuation of my concealing ploy. If something didn't happen soon, he would figure out I didn't know who he was.

After a pause, he switched moods--I was glad to see him pick up the burden of carrying on the conversation--moved his head closer, and whispered, "You ain't got nothing going for you? You aren't hiding, are you, Lee?"

I knew I wasn't hiding and told him so but as much as I hated to admit it to myself, the first question baffled me completely and I decided that a 'no' to it would have to be sufficient. Something about the questions he asked, though, seemed to be trying to tell me the man's identity; I suddenly recalled--though I couldn't quite decide if, in fact, I had recalled it, or again perhaps merely forced a false recall--that there had been a person in my past who had constantly irritated me by alternately calling me Les and Lee. Surely I was now irritated, and the irritation did seem very familiar.

"Hey, I was just wondering. I mean, you look kind of out of it, you know?"

I didn't exactly; still, there seemed to be an antagonistic edge to the way he said it. 'Well, damn it,' I thought, 'I can be just as cool as you,' so I answered: "And you smell pretty out of it yourself." Only I smiled as I said it so it wouldn't be too extremely personal, then

remembered I hadn't showered in three days and backed off to lean against the grapefruit stand.

If he was insulted, it didn't show as he asked me what I was shopping for and if I wanted to go get a couple of drinks.

We had walked the block and a half to the bar in silence when, just before entering, he turned to me and said, "Hey, Lee, I'm a little low on cash right now, you know?" He paused, I knew, to wait for me to tell him that that was okay. 'Well,' I thought, 'if I'm going to get taken for drinks, I'll at least make him ask.' And he did.

As we sat down he offered some sort of humble appreciation and started into what sounded like a hard-luck story but I paid no attention and instead, hastily computed the approximate cost of two average priced drinks compared with that of two beers, draft, bottled and imported, which wouldn't be enough for me so surely wouldn't satisfy him, and finally compared the cost of the drinks (suddenly worried that his 'couple' could stretch into four or five, and not necessarily average priced ones at that) with that of the pitchers of beer. The small one was tempting, but for an extra dollar I could sound benevolent. Feeling proud at having maneuvered myself into such economy, I looked up just in time to speak, "Large pitcher," before he could make his own order to the waiter.

I had gone quickly back to the menu to decide on pretzels or chips when the waiter drawled, "Light or dark?"

"Light," I nearly said; then, since it really didn't matter, I asked my companion which he preferred. His indifference--I think precipitated by my not allowing him to order a single drink--didn't help, so I cleverly

turned the decision back to the waiter--"Either"---and am sure he looked me over queerly before he walked away.

"Wanna hear some music? I do have a quarter." His words stopped my legs from shaking beneath the table as I wondered exactly how much money he did have on him.

"Sure." At least it had been an easy question.

"Here. Pick out a couple of good ones," he said as he tossed the quarter across the table.

As I walked to the juke box I wondered what he would have meant by 'good ones.' Hard rock was my first inclination because he looked and talked very much the type. But the bar itself had mellowed, already anticipating Monday morning, and I could feel the stares of all the men whose reveries would suddenly be blasted by screeching guitars; I naturally balked at so brash a choice. Folksy? Usually a good choice for when in doubt, but I feared the onset of melancholia and subsequently being unable to converse. As various alternatives passed through me, I scanned the list of tunes. Halfway through the second column I realized I wasn't comprehending their titles and the names of the artists were all strangers. Upon close and determined scrutiny I panicked--I didn't know any of the songs for it had been at least a year since I'd listened to the radio; I was lost. Mason City was no good, either, I decided as I watched the progressing multi-colored arrows flash across the back of the juke box and suddenly thought of Harpo winding up with the much-sought-after million dollar necklace, tortured to reveal its whereabouts by being forced to smoke rope for three hours, and finally escaping on the flashing puffs of smoke exhaling from Willie the Penguin's mouth, riding like bucking broncos the smoke-lights from that billboard in the sky. . .

And that was what I told my analyst, though I went into more detail about my personal identification with Harpo in at least a dozen movies, before I left him with my big revelation: "Tod," I said, "I think the great metaphor for life can be seen in the lowly and little known sand fiddler. You know, those little things with shells and squiggly legs that dig in the surf all the time? I used to wonder what they were all the time digging for, except maybe to keep from washing out to sea, but they didn't seem to mind getting washed out a little ways so I figured they must have some other reason for all that perpetual digging.

"So the other night I found out why. I found the crabs out on the beach, one every three feet, eating the little fuckers left and right. And the next day I snuck up on a bunch of birds poking down into the sand and pulling 'em out, every time they stuck it in the sand they got one, just like that." I paused for dramatic effect before adding the moral of my metaphor. "At night the crabs get 'em, and during the day the birds get 'em, and all they do is keep on digging."

Tod, my analyst, studied that one for a minute and told me: "Yes, yes. But why not like the worm? Or even more elaborately, like the fly and the spider and cat and mouse--everything in life and nature that is in opposition. . ."

"I'm talking about you and me and your secretary."

"Yes, and I'm talking of the same things, just showing you other metaphors for this 'you-can't-get-away-from-it-all' way of looking at life that I suspected you of having. It's not unique, and in most cases, shouldn't lead to any trouble. It came to you, in the metaphor, in a moment of reflection that struck you suddenly as interesting."

"No. As profound."

"As profound? I see. You are serious then, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"It's not just an interesting idea to you?"

"No. It's a fact."

"This is serious. Do you feel they're about to get you?"

"I think they already have."

"And how long have they had you?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that."

We were both silent for several minutes. I lit a cigarette and walked over to the window.

"Perhaps you need a change of environment. A bigger city, perhaps. Away from the University. You've been around here a long time now, you know. Yes. A change would do you good. I'll speak to a friend of mine in Mason City. Perhaps he can find you a job. Would you like to move to Mason City?"

I certainly didn't have anything against Mason City, though I suspected he was merely getting tired of me. I realized then, too, that my big metaphor was pretty bad; I would have just to dig deeper--I wondered why didn't those sand fiddlers think of that? then reasoned, of course, they still would have to come up for air. . .

"Hey, Lee, you okay? They ain't that bad are they?" He was already scanning the list of songs.

"I just can't decide," I said as I carefully placed the quarter in the corner of the glass, George Washington's head upside down and looking

somewhat mad; I then followed the line of his forehead and nose back to our table.

By the time I had poured a glass of beer a raucous steel guitar had begun to scream; my companion bobbed his head vigorously and jerked his body as he punched up the next song, completely ignorant of the fact that everyone in the bar had turned to stare at him.

"Man, I was getting worried about you," he said as he came back to the table, the stares following him all the way. They all probably thought I had chosen the first one before coming back to my seat. "You sure nothing's wrong?" he continued as he finished the last of his beer and poured another.

"The fact of the matter is, quite simply, I'm losing my mind." I looked up from the closest edge of the table to see if he reacted. He did, slowly, but without speaking. His mouth, quite predictably, fell open, as I continued, "I suspect that part of it is already gone. I don't have any idea who you are, or why I should know you, and I'm prone to what has been termed, in literature at least, as *cosmosis*."

He shook his head slowly, much the way my analyst was constantly doing when I could almost feel his mind churning to come up with the exact right thing to say. But my present companion, being somewhat less articulate than Tod, could only finally muster a weak, "So you're losing your mind." But he suddenly nodded his head faster, smiled knowingly, and I felt an immediate surge of embarrassment at having arrived at the point where, first, I once again came back to that conclusion which I had been warned by Tod to stay away from, and second, blurted it out so matter-of-factly, having surely magnified each of my little insanities to ridiculous proportions.

"How do you know?" was finally his question.

I quoted automatically from Tod: "Any early sign that you may be going mad is that you notice more and more things about other people that seem strange to you. Conversations may become incomprehensible, actions inexplicable, as this symptom advances." I skipped the part about having trouble making little decisions, as that was a symptom I had developed a special and jealous fondness for, and continued with the qualifier: "The trouble is, it's just too easy to be crazy in this country. So when it happens, you might tend to wonder if it's all turning to madness or, simply, you beginning to see things in a different perspective, which certainly shouldn't always be bad. You may experience difficulty in coping, but it is only when that difficulty becomes too powerful to overcome that you're in trouble."

I didn't know if I had properly answered his question but felt pretty good about the general idea as we sat in silence. Finally, he cleared his throat, looked me in the eye for the first time, and said, "Incomprehensible. That's what your words are, man. And inexplicable. Does that mean maybe that we're both losing our shit? I ain't understanding a thing you're talking about, perspectives and coping, I just wanted to know the symptoms real simple. . ." His sentence trailed off but I didn't feel like trying to straighten him out any further so gladly slipped into a comfortable silence.

Again, it was he who broke it. "You remember that night we stayed up all night rapping? Well, I was thinking about that just the other day, about that poem of yours I found on the t.v. or somewhere, that anti-war poem--'Midnight in Peoria and nothing's playing' was the first line, I think." And he stopped, just like that.

I realized that I had never really known this person, that perhaps he'd stayed late after a party and happened to talk some with me, and that this evening was probably all he had really known to bring up for conversation. It made me a little sad that he wasn't really one of my greatest, best friends from out of the past whose memory had simply been temporarily blocked in my mind. I remembered the poem, only as I recalled it, it was sort of a love poem, and tried to bring forth the next lines. 'You walk the strip along/alone'--and that became the crucial word to recall because I suddenly saw myself seated at the typewriter, having meant to write one of those words, but typing the other, and the rest of the poem flowing smoothly and automatically over the page.

"You ever send it off to get it published?"

"Hnuh? No, never did," I said and decided that things had gotten strange enough for one evening with a stranger.

CARMEN

The room was long and narrow, gray, spotted with an occasional poster (L. Farlinghetti standing in the doorway of his City Lights Book Store, the caption, borrowed from the Bible, proclaiming I AM THE DOOR; a simulated canvas reproduction of Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights'), with two chairs, two book-cases, a single bed (array issue), a yellow-grained desk, two lamps, a typewriter, refrigerator, steam heat and a terrarium of carnivorous plants--Venus fly-traps, pitcher plants and Butterworts. . .

The room was mine.

And to think that, Sometime during the year some guy comes into the Corner Grill and Sundry Shop across from the front of the court square and just to the left of the gray statue honoring our Confederate dead, and looks at the four policemen drinking coffee, waiting for their shift to be over, and looks at THE PAST (is just a photograph; preserve and t-shirt (Camels rolled into your memories)), sweaty forehead, tattooed forearms ('Gretel' reminds him constantly of The War), two missing front teeth lost in that same war, and a perpetual grin pierced alternately with a wooden watch or Camel. And this guy runs his finger along the stove to check for collected grease, and tells the waitress that she really should wear a hair net, then writes down "89.5% Sanitation Grade B" on a piece of white cardboard manufactured in Boise for just that purpose so that Bob gets to keep his life open for at least another year. Bob says, "Coffee's on me, fellas." He is happy.

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And this same guy puts away his pen and cardboard and escorts Carmen, with her tight green eyes and Indian cheeks, to a special cocktail party honoring the latest recipients of the Annual Anderson County Literary Award (short story, poetry, drama, children's story and essay). At the party he meets Mrs. Tomlinson, who is constantly standing in the midst of at least three young gentlemen, all of whom she would insist were admirers--for who but she has been responsible for organizing these wonderful little cocktail parties for the last seven years?

She is a robust figure of forty-five, with dyed silver hair piled into a bee-hive on top of her head. Two enormous pearls stick into her ear lobes--the kind that are separated from the head, a recessive trait not unlike the ability to roll one's tongue.

The sanitation expert soon becomes the loudest of those surrounding her for it is now the time when

Leslie Begins His Act

The light focuses directly on her silver sequined gown. Rows of pearls drape about her folds of neck.

"Yes, here's to you, Mrs. Tomlinson. Jesus loves you more than you will ever know." A few heads turn to see who it is that laughed these words.

Mrs. Tomlinson stiffens when he says That Name, but decorum keeps her silent. He raises his glass, she meets it. Another from the circle joins the toast.

Mrs. Tomlinson insists on knowing all about him. He is, to her, a new face, an interesting face, a little younger than the rest.

"Well, you see, I'm a writer. A song writer. I don't know much music, but my theory of popular music is this: The key mind you, is in the lyrics. You have to be subtly intellectual." He glances up to see if she will accept this. Her dull-blue eyes spread wide in eager anticipation to lead him onward.

He clears his throat and pauses to glance about the circle, now numbering six. "Records that I have written have sold over ten million copies and Mrs. Tomlinson, that's a figure I don't often tell to just anyone. You see, I use about five different pseudonyms (none of which I'm at liberty to divulge) because I want my records to sell on quality and not just from a name."

Mrs. Tomlinson looks confused. The Great Pretender whispers to her that he could talk more openly if they were alone--it's so rare to find a compassionate and intelligent audience at these parties.

Before she leads him out she calls, "Brian, two more cocktails, please." TGP carries the drinks and follows the trail of her gown out onto the patio.

The warm June air is filled with sounds of crickets and other such bugs of the night as she asks, "Have you written any new songs?"--always eager to hear the news before it breaks.

He sucks the soft, magnolia-ed air into his imagination and smiles at its gentle fragrance. The moon is barely visible over the new water tower as he speaks: "Well, my latest is a simple type song. I think, though, that that may be the new trend in lyrics, and this one could be my best seller yet. I wrote it for, no, I can't tell you that. But it's scheduled for release within the month. I can tell you the chorus, though, which I suppose I'm kind of proud of:

But I left her down in Birmingham,
 She's waitin for me still
 Sittin on that single bed
 And sleepin with our dream. . ."

He pauses and looks into her expectant eyes, counts to five slowly, and softly adds, "I'm sorry, but that's all my publisher will allow me to repeat."

For several moments more there is silence. Stunned silence. To honor words that have touched the immortal soul.

a beginning

'I am a singer in a local folk band/ I sing the songs you know across this land/ Let's get together, never feel the pain/ The sun and moon seem to fear the rain.' Words come quickly smoothly STOP for a while, moments become minutes, I am blank. 'Rain,' make it into a thing that's ours--fear it too? 'Eyes,' something with 'eyes.' Change the rhyme change the beat--'Our thoughts are rhyming, can you feel it now?/ Our love is soaring, our minds are clouds/ BUT We'll feel the pain/ AND We'll lose the gain/ We'll be trying to try all in vain. . .'

As light breaks the thin barrier between the bottom of the window shade and sill, as an early student slams a car door in the parking lot, I understand the night, can tell you, if you ask, what has transpired in the darkness. But first, I think I'm hungry, ready now for breakfast. Song-writing passes time; it has served its purpose and I've nearly made it now till another dawn.

I drive the car knowing only vaguely where I am. South side of town, cross the interstate and see lights that must be real--lights from

deep within, not flashing at my side, lights that show me people, just a few, lights that smell of waffles you ol' waffle shoppe you're mine.

Waitress, she's a pretty one, smiles and says, "How do?" A blast of thoughts run through my head but none come out my mouth. Smothered by, I think, a smile. Her hand moves slowly across the pad, her mouth-- it moves again, makes angry horn, honking sound but smiles; her hand, small and pale, broken nails, slides now up and down; she has my order and I start to drift. . .

"Your order, sir?" Impatience. She has asked me that before. Thoughts jump back for orientation, I read the menu spread before me.

The voice that comes from within doesn't seem to be my own; it's loud, fills the room, cook looks up from grill, shakes his viper eyes, bums look straight at me, nod and seem to understand. "Drunk on his ass," is what they say.

"Coffee," booms. "and a waffle," follows meekly, lost in thundering echo but she's gone.

Come up, I say, come up for air, to the taste of Kool and Willie the Penguin stares in at me from the frosted glass. "Well, dammit, Willie, where the hell you been? Back of some ol' Mad Avenue freak's file?"

"oh here, there. a little bit old to care. you know or don't you dare?"

"Oh, I know, I'm sure I do," I say as he offers me a match, for I can talk in absurdities as well as the next penguin.

"filters." he spits the word at me, flickers the flame that lights up his shiny tuxedo face and softly rounded beak.

"never thought they'd be the bigness that they are." He winks, long lashes flutter coyly.

"I didn't know your eyes were green."

"ha ha, ho ho. i see just what you mean." He pecks the table before him, eyes spinning in opposite circles, and little wings flapping slightly beneath his jacket before he adds, as a wry after-thought, "think i'll scream," and nods his head reflectively.

But before I can plead, "No don't," she comes back, sets a waffle on his head; I moan.

"You okay?" She whispers, concerned, I'm sure. "I mean, you look a little gone."

"Tired," I say. "Been sleeping bad, working hard."

"Where you from?"

I look up at her again, confused, for she is my waitress and has done her job, yet still she's here. She looks into my eyes, waiting for me to answer but I can't, rather, smile and shake my head.

"Did you already tell me that some other time? I mean I don't remember seeing you before, so you're just going to have to tell me what it is that's so damn baffling." Her tone, I think, is playful but I cannot be sure.

I finally start to speak but she interrupts me, asks to sit a minute--"break," she explains, as she has picked up what I now feel must be my own expression. Her word does not register, spins around in my head, but "Sure" I say, then: "Brake." I understand--she means 'go slow calm down' (I'm with you?) and I offer her a Kool.

"Actually," I try to explain as I'm suddenly filled with a rush of sanity, "I'm from here but I am leaving. Have never felt I was from here though here is mostly all I've known. Today I slept--I haven't got a job--and tonight I tried to write a song, then went out to see the town that I was leaving."

I have nothing more to say, look to her wondering eyes and nod once, can see her comprehend. She blushes slightly, smiles a soft, "Oh," and so we talk. She asks for a quarter once for the juke box, plays two Van Morrison songs I haven't heard in months, shares my Kools, talks and listens. After the songs on the juke box are gone we sit again in silence that confuses me by its comfort. I am, at one point, astounded by the sheer beauty of our conversation, stop to listen once to a man quarreling with his wife and am astounded by the beauty of their quarrel so wonder what exactly's going on.

I excuse myself to the bathroom but dammit nothing comes and in walks the quarreling man from outside. He stands behind me to make a neat two man line, clears his throat but doesn't speak. Still nothing comes, I shake and pull, then twist, concentrate on nothing--let it naturally flow--concentrate directly on my bladder, think to just flush the commode and walk away but know that he'll know I didn't go and there at last it comes, gurgling into the bowl; I am relieved.

And she? Laughs like she's possessed when I recount my little escapade, curious to know if I'd been gone long but less than two minutes she says, and laughs till she begs me to make her stop, holds her sides and laughs.

And so we break together as my coffee once is stirred but never sipped, waffles become shrivelled cardboard. Ash tray nearly filled, she

stretches, says "I better wash some dishes, why don't you wait?" Her upper lip draws tightly over teeth, dimples show like caves dug into the sides of her Indian cheeks; she winks.

I know I want to know her so I wait.

From our first meeting in the waffle shop came a dinner date. That evening dragged on interminably for us both, yet I'm sure we were both sad to part. I wrote her, to thank her for her time; she answered to say that, truly, it was grand.

The first night she stayed with me we lay in darkness until 5 a.m. The darkness--yes it must have been the darkness--made it possible to talk again. There was only a voice, one of kindness, whispering out its questions and tales of its very own. I feigned being hot, removed my shirt. She declined, though not emphatically, to do the same.

We lay together then and talked; listened to Leonard Cohen's stories of the street complete with creeping cadillacs filled with poison gas and those strangest children, those of dust; I loved her in the morning. When finally I fell asleep, my mind still reeled with thoughts of her. They crowded my mind until they forced me awake again. I opened my eyes to see her smiling into my face. She whispered, "Kiss me good morning," as a tear spilled from her thin green eyes.

She was gone then, for a vacation to her home. "I'll see you next Sunday," was her promise.

I spent the rest of the morning at the zoo, tired and went home and back to bed, fell down on it without bothering to pull back the covers and as I slid my hand under the pillow, touched a paper. Withdrawing it

as though I'd found some secret key, I stared at the words: 'When everything is finished, the mornings are sad.' She wrote like a princess.

I paused to ponder on that statement, got up to get a Coke. Wrapped around the bottle was another note that read, 'Mine were the last hands to touch your bottle,' and brought laughter to me that soon ran beyond control, forced me to heave for breath, and streaked my face with tears.

That afternoon, when I picked up Point Counter Point and turned to my place--Walter was preparing to ask Burlap for a raise, mostly at Marjorie's insistence--I found a marker made from two Ziz-zags gummed together: 'What are you doing, reading when you should be mourning my tragic loss?'

a fulcrum

We had just come back from a week in the mountains during which my battery had died on me no less than four times, and were unpacking what remnants of food we had left over. I opened the door to our closet-cabinet and was summarily attacked by a mouse who sat, perched for an instant on a sponge mop that stood upside down and suspended from the wall by brackets put there for that purpose by the previous occupants of the place. The mouse leaped at me with a horribly grotesque squeak but his leap fell a couple of yards short and he hit the floor of the closet, legs churning him then into a perfect little cartoon-mousehole I'd never noticed in the baseboard. When he leaped, I jumped back and screamed, dropping a can of Brunswick stew on my foot; Carmen ran from the room.

When I found her in the hallway, standing in a corner, she shakily asked me what it had been. "A mouse," I said.

We discussed at some length what we were then to do. A search of the condiments in our cupboard showed no obvious signs of forced entry but still, the presence of the mouse seemed un-natural. I still was inclined to leave him be, and argued that he couldn't possibly eat very much; she countered by pointing out that to do nothing was to risk being overrun by vermin, and clinched her argument by hinting that it could easily develop into an either/or situation, my apartment not being large enough for the three of us. I vowed to buy a mouse trap the next day.

It's hard, I found out, to find a mouse trap in Jeffersonville. I went first to the convenient mart, then to the drug store and the hardware before finding one in the grocery store beside the yeast.

"Don't sell many of those anymore," said the old man who checked me out.

"Why's that?"

"Not since '62, I believe, when the city put out their poison. Really did the trick. You got a mouse or a rat?"

"A mouse, I think. Little and gray with a tiny door in the baseboard."

"Yep. Sounds like a mouse to me. They don't do no harm," and he stared coldly at my hands as I picked up the trap and told him I didn't need a bag.

I had never really seen a mouse trap but found it relatively easy to operate, though I did nearly catch a thumb when it snapped shut as I carried it from the table to the mouse's doorstep. Carmen stood away from me, by the hot water heater, offering constant cautions as I reloaded the trap and carefully set the trigger. Once in place, I watched it for

ten minutes, finally trusted it to stay cocked, and shut the closet door.

I dreamed that night of little mice running every where; she said she couldn't sleep at all. But the next morning the trap lay undisturbed. After another day I was convinced the mouse was smart enough to live and I would therefore remove my hazard. I lay awake for an hour trying to decide whether or not to lie to her and say that I had caught it, or to tell the truth and admit that I couldn't go through with it. I made no decision.

The next morning I awoke with a start, my heart beating rapidly and I knew I was too late. Quickly I ran to the closet, opened the door and reached for the trap, still hoping to get there in time. I stopped in mid-motion and stared at the trap lying in its original position, only now a two-inch mouse protruded from beneath the metal that had crushed its neck. The cheese-bait rested against his nose--he hadn't even tasted it; the brilliant black of his right eye stared blankly at me and a tiny trickle of ebony outlined the cheese and spilled into a 3-4 drop puddle by the base of the trap.

I gently picked the trap up, carried it to the trash can outside in the alley where I threw it and its victim away. She never asked about the trap; I never mentioned it.

an ending

We lived together for 47 weeks, not straight through, but for the better part of them anyway. I never figured what she saw in me and

thought it best not to question it. We kept a one-room flat (we called it that though neither of us were exactly clear on what constituted one) that could be called a two-roomer if you counted the bath. It was in a basement next to the boiler which only seemed to work when the temperature rose over 45°.

After I tired of inspecting restaurants, I drove a milk truck for three days, two of which I slept through. I quit before they fired me. I also sold seven articles, all to cheap magazines that catered to very specific interests like outdoor cooking and understanding your adolescent and why we should give a damn about things I sometimes didn't even know were things at all. I went to some of her classes with her and sometimes drank coffee as she waited on tables at the waffle house, but usually only when I tired of sitting in the room or walking the streets around it.

I finished the words to a song once and sent it off to Songs, Ltd., in Hollywood, California, after I saw an ad of theirs in a magazine. They wrote back immediately, by air mail, that for only \$40 I could have them put the words to music (my choice of style--rock, folk, blues, country, etc.). We laughed about the whole thing and they sent me a series of "last chances" to take advantage of this "personal and special, once-in-a-life-time value." Each letter cut the price by five dollars until it hit \$19.95, at which point I received three final last chances before being abandoned to the throes of un-published song-dom.

We used to spend hours at a time looking through old magazines and ordering all the free things everyone was so anxious to give away. That put us on more mailing lists so we were able to spend just as much time reading form letters and special offers from Gag House, Erotic Mysteries

Publishing Company, Reader's Digest, stamp collection agencies--we received, for only one dime, a series of sixteen Adolph Hitler commemorative stamps, exact duplicates of those used by Germany in the war--and all kinds of discount houses. After we tired of all of these, we followed Dear Ann Lander's advice and began returning all the endless drivel stuffed back into the return envelope. Most of the places pay return postage and think (I know this for it was in her column) when they get one of their letters back that they've hooked someone. Our daily letter supply was cut in half in just over two weeks of this practice.

On Saturday, January 15 (the Farmer's Almanac said it was a good day for weeding) she asked me, "What are we going to do?" It wasn't as though I hadn't thought about it before, and it wasn't as though I didn't care, because I thought about it often and cared about it even more. I mean, everybody knows you just don't grow old in a \$35 a month room with a bed and assorted mis-matched furniture of unknown origin. Besides, the needle in the stereo was terribly worn since it hadn't been replaced since I left school myself and you could hardly understand what Neil Young said when he sang, "Be on my side, I'll be on your side." The only things of any value to me in the room were the stereo, records, a few of the books and the typewriter--the rest wasn't worth the rent. I had learned to consolidate my things after carting them from room to room for several moves. She brought only plants--cactuses, kalanchoes and a bonsai lemon tree.

Anyway, I looked over at her where she sat, staring out at the rain and her blonde hair falling more on her left shoulder than her right. If we had been anywhere but this basement, she could have stared out and

really seen something, but here it was an eternal view of a brick wall that was perpetually a foot deep in mosquito water. A brick had worked its way loose about a foot above her head and I wondered why I'd never noticed it before.

"I don't know," was all I could think to say and I knew it wasn't sufficient.

"I can't go on this way," was her line, straight from the mid-afternoon Popcorn Theatre I sometimes saw on channel nine at the library. "My mind's going to explode."

I wondered, for some reason, how many other people split up this way and if anyone else was doing it at just this minute or in these same circumstances, flashed back to my childhood fantasy that somewhere in China there was someone just like me who did everything I did and exactly as I did it, mirrored perfectly on our separate sides of the world, then thought how disappointed she must be that it was going to all be over in just a few minutes and the whole scene couldn't have gotten a tear from even my grandmother who used to cry (before they took her t.v. away) even at domestic quarrels in commercials about floor wax.

She kept staring out at that loose brick and the water running off it, or possibly just at the whole brick wall, or maybe not at anything at all. I suddenly wanted my camera back from the pawn shop because she was in one of those perfect poses that I had used to think I could capture her in, and after the shutter would click we would find our way into our single bed and her eyes would be happy.

There were lots of things I should have said; even more I wanted to say. The sounds of the street, each with their own separate story, suddenly

filled the room and were all we heard for several minutes. I saw on her face a tear and wondered if it were real or perhaps, some way, the reflection of a drop of rain rolling down the window. Of all the things that were in my head, the only thoughts I could vocalize were, "I'm sorry," and I realized then that this was the first time in too many years these words had come from me.

I didn't find out if she believed me as she left without another word. Occasionally I went back to the window, stood and looked out about her, only to be told that she had gone.

The room was empty.

The room was, once again, mine.

"I know it wouldn't last. She's got her own way," said Mr. Frigget. "As a matter of fact, I told her it wouldn't work, but she wanted to try it two ago. Can tell your type and you've got her. It's all over that I mean."

I looked back at Mrs. Frigget, and she said, "I've never mentioned of us."

Mr. Frigget's door opened. She came in and said, "I've just been to the john. The toilet has been broken and I've been going to all that down. (She's a woman who has been to the toilet, make?)."

While thinking through all the things that were in my head, I read the words of Northampton's letter. It was a letter of ultimate decision making off and on. It was a letter that told me how things really are, the things that were in my head. I know all I need to make sure that the things that were in my head something to make an ultimate decision.

ROOMS

For several days I stayed in my room, drinking and smoking myself into exhaustion, sometimes wandering out at dawn to wait for the grocery store to open so I could re-stock my essentials. I knew I wouldn't be able to stay in the same place, so soon found another a couple of blocks away. Occasionally I went back to the waffle shop and asked one time about her, only to be told that she had quit.

"Ya'll split up?" The cook called from behind the grill.

"Yeah."

"I knew it wouldn't last. She's got too much sense," and he laughed. "As a matter of fact, I told her it wouldn't work, just about a month or two ago. Can tell your type and you're not hers, if you know what I mean."

I looked back at him, startled, and wondered what she might have mentioned of us.

Mr. Trigget's door creaks. Time for the 4 a.m. trek--his nightly visit to the john. The janitor told me three times already that he was going to oil that door. Gurggle-gurggle-flush (Is that the sound that toilets make?).

While thumbing through an old Newsweek, seeing the news that was, I read the words of Northwestern Mutual's Revelation: "No one can take the ultimate decision making off your shoulders. But the more you know about how things really are, the lighter the burden will be." And I think that I know all I need to know about how things really, just need now to find something to make an ultimate decision about.

A shower now, before the others start to wake. That pre-dawn feeling with the whole day fresh and neatly folded, all ready for my entrance and maybe, just maybe, this will be The Day (T-Day, as it's known in the vernacular). But playing the odds, for one must do that as surely as he must look at things as they really are, sets T-Day aside with all the other little games contrived by my hungry mind. Not bad, 'hungry mind.'

"Washed ashore, on a lonely island in the sea. . ." Appearing, back by popular demand, at the area's leading collegiate night club, the one and only recording Flatters. Yes you'll hear "The Great Pretender," "With this Ring," "Washed Ashore," all the greatest hits by the one and only recording Platters. And of course we'll be serving your favorite ice-cold beverages al-l-l night long, so make the scene at the Tomb. Now we're gonna tell you all about the weather for the next three days. . ."

That's what you think, dickie-j. Amazing, the power of the wrist. Quarter inch to the left and poor dickie-j my d.j.'s talking to himself.

By seven o'clock the beer is cool. Who was it said you should never drink beer with your breakfast? Mother?--must have been, since she never watched the movies and relished telling me things I shouldn't do. But two sips and I know she was right; half-way through the first bottle it doesn't matter anymore.

Monday is a day for writing letters. Must get something done before it gets too late, then the waste of the rest of the day can be justified.

A quick one to my congressman complaining now of people spitting on the buses, and returnable to 442 Glenwood Avenue. A Chamber of Commerce? But I can't think of where, till I recall Northwestern Mutual's advertisement--Mason City, city of my dreams and of my insurance company, I have

decided just this moment that I want to know you and will perhaps soon be in your midst, for I also remember that I was supposed to be leaving Jeffersonville, had to leave.

To Mr. Trigget? Of course. Then to watch him wait for all his mail that never comes. Hungry minds are cruel minds sometimes.

Dear Mr. Trigget,

I feel as though I really must confess this to you, in the hope that we can, perhaps, somehow get together. I know that things cannot work out for us at this time, for reasons that I must keep from you.

But I really wanted to tell you that I have watched you on your daily visit to the bathroom every morning at four, and have come to admire your ways. Perhaps it's the way you hitch your belt, or smile to yourself, maybe it's just your stride.

I want only to ask this small favor. On Wednesday, when you step into the hall, turn to the far window and wave. You won't see me, but please, know that I am there, and that, above all else, I care. I really do. We must be patient. Please.

your secret love,

leslie jane

ps

I don't care what they say
I won't stay in a world w/out love.

I stayed up most of the night before I was to be evicted. Until 9 a.m. on Tuesday, the room was mine. After that, it belonged to a tall Polish widow--"a quiet lady, somebody that won't abuse everybody else's privileges, and that'll pay her rent on time, not to be throwing off on you, mind you. But you got to admit you aren't the best boarder a body could have."

Miss Barton's words had rolled around in my head for nearly half an hour as I sat pondering my next move. Then I drew a bottle of Granny's Sweet Georgia Peach from the refrigerator and drank it, slowly at first, till finally gulping the last fifth at once. In the den, the late news was on. Then the weather. Maybe the first frost of the season. After the weather, silence. No one in the house was interested in the least whether any one had won or lost, or even played, in the weird world of sports. Silence. The house was mine and I drew another bottle from the refrigerator.

At midnight, I raised the shades, opened the window, rolled a joint, and thought of peeing in Miss Barton's tea pitcher. Outside the Winter Hexagon was rising, their legends nearly completely lost to me except for that of Orion who protected the Pleiades from the fury of Taurus, or vice versa. Ten minutes later I remembered the joint, smoked it, and felt my mind drift away where

The purple bellies, pricked by barbs of a rusted fence, broken by a wandering she-cow-wondering--from the Mullen's farm onto the Stuart's--roll by as if lost in the clouds of dust, rising to cover the droplets of black blood that fall slowly with a rhythm like a black man sweating his soul out at the Anderson County tent revival. Bloated, the bellies can see no reason for the acts of violence, the pain they must endure. Bruises top bruises till the blood is ready to burst forth even before the flesh is touched by the jagged rusted barb. Five women run into the field--each a part of Carmen yet none her all alone, one with tight green eyes, another

with her slender legs still another with her blonde hair streaming in the wind; they chase the animal, screaming obscenities. Blood runs from the front-running girl's knees and covers her shins; then her bobby socks mat with brilliancy. Yet onward she runs, and I watch from my perch on top of the bell tower at the local college, the point tearing through my mind, forcing into my head all the thoughts ever passed through the minds of that college until it literally explodes.

I can see the girls and cow no more.

A constant tapping on the door awakened me. "Leslie, Leslie, time to go. The new boarder is here. You better find another place before dark. If you don't, you come back here and I'll fix you up something in the basement."

I shook my head, but failed to clear it. My things were packed though I didn't remember doing it. My mouth was dry and my eyes wouldn't stay open long enough for me to wash them out. As I went to my closet to see if anything still remained, I kicked an empty wine bottle and stumbled into the wall.

Miss Barton heard the noise and called, "You okay, Leslie?" Only after she heard me mutter and cough did she leave her place by the door, calling as her footsteps faded, "Now hurry up, son. It's almost time."

I made it through the door and down the stairs. In the den, Miss Barton sat, talking with the tall Polish widow, who smiled at me as I passed. I started to say something nice to them both, even got as far as stepping with head turned and mouth open. But all that came out was a hoarse, "I'm all done now." Then I was out in the sunshine of the autumn day and headed north.

At the first house, I walked in after no one answered the bell. A note directed, "If you're looking for the room, it's up the stairs and on the right, two doors down." I climbed them, and with the new expanse of energy grew dizzy. I opened the door and turned my head slowly. The four walls were blank, plaster falling from the ceiling; the wooden floor was badly warped and all of it, walls, ceiling and floor, was painted a dirty beige. No windows. A lamp sat in the far corner. I walked the nine steps to it and switched it on. Forty watts. As I completed my turn around the room, I heard approaching steps.

A burly grey head burst through the opening between the door and wall. I thought for a moment it belonged to the cook at the waffle shop, but he gave no sign of immediate recognition as he spoke, "How you like it?" He held a pipe in his left hand, puffed it occasionally.

"I've seen better. Where's the bathroom? Why aren't there any windows?"

"Bath's on the next floor up. Three comodes, two showers, two sinks. Ain't never been no windows in this room for as far back as I can remember. And when've you seen better for \$25 a month?" He had trouble standing, and leaned against the wall, panting heavily.

I took a pencil from my coat pocket and stepped over to the nearest wall where I wrote, in quick, neatly formed letters, "Sanitation Grade D-" and left the room. I called back to the man, without turning my head, as I descended the stairs two at a time, "You got two weeks to get this crap cleaned up. I'll be back."

I walked down the porch steps and into the afternoon, headed west, into the fading sun. Two more places to check before it got dark.

A JOB

I stayed for another year in Jeffersonville, mainly because of the work I then found. My money depleted, I turned back to the profession I had sworn off just prior to meeting Carmen, that of dealing. I knew it would be simple to start back for I was confident Ptolemy was still in town. I had told him, just before meeting Carmen, that I was leaving. So when I found him again I explained, for the sake of simplicity, that I had just gotten back to town.

We still had the touch and the weeks went by quickly as my bank account grew greatly. But, despite the money, I knew things weren't right. My mind had begun to play little tricks on me again and I constantly forgot what I was saying in mid-sentence.

Bypassing Owensboro speeding feeling fine, sunset and less than two hours to go. Indiana wants me Lord I know and this time come tomorrow reckon where I'll be, high in some lonesome valley in the hills of Tennessee. Probably, no, surely, I had decided, that it was my last run, not that the signs of danger had been glimpsed but those odds kept increasing and the vision was more frequent of having it made and then: Flashing blue lights fill the rear view mirror, stub-nosed patrolman asks for license and wants to know what it is in the back of this here u-haul-it yo're speeding across Kentucky in. 'Why just some furniture officer,' then, 'Sure,' he'd say and either believe me or want to see for himself in which case I was dead I mean what would they do to you when they found 500

pounds of freshly cut marijuana stacked to the ceiling in a u-haul-it? And that's just what we'd have after a night's work in the fields along the Ohio River where acre upon acre grew, wild as the weed it was.

The story said it grew up after the army quit tending it from its rope making days before World War II, the Ohio River flooding a few times to spread the seeds in nature's way. What mattered to us--Ptolemy, Gary and I--was that it was there. On the previous trips we'd cleared an average of \$10,000 a piece each time and that was nice oh so nice spreading money all over town and county, nothing, including coke, unaffordable, everything relished with still thousands in savings. It can't really be this easy but I gotta stop or I'll have to pay and Lord it's better when it's free. So one more trip then, this one and I'll stop I swear I'll stop and get a job or maybe just deal from connections in town still a good business but not so high a mark-up--I mean what business can you go to where you handle \$30,000 worth of goods and your only overhead is the \$250 for a u-haul-it and a handful of speed?

Though the Indiana weed is not good smoke, mainly because we have to chop it indiscriminately, ravaging an area and then splitting--there's still an endless stream of college kids that will gladly give \$150 for a pound, though generally we only sold in quantities of ten or more, scaling the price down accordingly.

And so we drive the last thirty miles in silence, easing through the darkened approach to the fields. A gibbous moon gives ample light to compensate for absent head lights and Ptolemy remembers the way more quickly than me. Gary is along for the first time jerking his head from side to side, straining for that first glimpse of proper green. Ptolemy

cuts down a final dirt pathway and the u-haul creeps along in near silence. Outside cicadas sing of summer and breeze blows cool through open window on my face. Truck stops, Gary whispers "are we here?" say "yessir, yes we're here" and shine the light on a nine foot plant at the side of the road. "We're here," Gary says, "we're here" as I pan the light to reveal the jungle "we are here" and we take the scythes from the back of the truck and work.

Cutting comes easy, effortless, as I pile stalks like kindling, load an armful into the van and go for more. Cicadas never stop, we seldom talk--gather once and stand in awe of one 18-foot plant with stalk like young maple tree that Gary barely dents with scythe and I say, "Best leave that one be."

The work is done in a little over four hours by which time I'm sweating heavily, a little slowed but beginning to pick up on new speed. Stop to rest, light a Kool, my first in hours so I have another. Gary talking to himself, shaking his head and counting on his fingers.

"You reckon we got 500 pounds?" he asks us two veterans of the harvest.

"Never got it quite this full before," says Ptolemy as we pull sheets over the bulging mass and stack chairs and tables neatly to the top.

"Time to move," I say.

Behind the wheel the engine catches, hums softly, we are off grimly quiet knowing we are over half way there but wishing we were done. Ptolemy hisses, "Stop;" I do as he points to gray shape moving toward us. "Too big for cops," he notes, relieved, and I flash the flash light three dots and a dash. The flash comes back across the distance and I continue

our truck towards it, pull alongside and talk with Iowans come to these green acres for their fill.

"See anybody else?" they ask and I say "no."

"Pickings good?" and I say "yeah."

"First trip?"

"Last."

Iowa driver smiles and says "mine too."

"Gotta run, good luck," but he wants speed; I find my vial and pour into his shallow palm.

"Where you headed?" he wants to know.

"Tennessee--gotta move," I answer as I shake away the bill he offers me, glad to be rolling.

Briefly I consider the roads back, wind up on 41 drifting south towards the setting moon. Hundred miles from Clarksville sun rising over shoulders, Kool's still tasting fine though clenched jaws start to ache. Getting tired and ready to stop. Move on. Bigger towns better places, kinder faces. Should be gone already. Critical time this is. Another year will break me, leave me here forever. Gotta leave while still a chance, get away and yes this is my last trip. Can feel the speed eating on my insides, tobacco rotting lungs, marijuana cutting up my brain cells--drug psychosis?--and look at my far away hands, nails long and broken, dirt caked underneath, scratched and bleeding, old and wrinkled not my hands, think 'my god I am wasted nearly gone, rotten,' and I fight back the naseau. Deep breaths, slowly. Reach for more speed, think clearer, once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide and the more I know about how things really are, the easier it is to make that decision--

Mason City here I come--by god I do decide and my hand pulls back from the vial and I push a little harder on the accelerator to get home before it's gone completely.

Highway 13 at last, last stretch of road, less than an hour away but I see trouble, blue flashings in the sky ahead, wreck? No, road-block and it is two cars blocking each lane four others stretched along the shoulders. Bust through? No, busted sitting in jail, time rotting me away like drugs have been doing, county jail state pen numbers on my back and a job. Making license plates, working in the sun like summers during high school pouring concrete with wrinkled blood-shot black men and little boy walks by curb we lay and asks his mama if they're all murderers or robbers and the blacks laugh, I think though that you are all prisoners as sure as if you were in jail as Weymouth breaks into a Red Foley spiritual and pats the concrete in place, then cuts into that 'na-na-na song'--"I like them beetles" he says and sonny and chair and polk salat, still he's working on that crew like he was the year I was born and still off when it rains with no pay and two raises in ten years, them minimum wage increases, not \$2.50 an hour yet. What did you think about while they were busting you, someone will surely ask, and me, I thought on the plight of the concrete worker. . .

The approaching face is covered by shadow from round brim of hat but shines brightly when tilted up to look at me. "I need your license," it says and does he smile does he know did they watch us all along and wait, sit and wait for us to run to them? He studies my face and I know that I have erred forever will I regret having license picture snapped long hair flowing beard bleeding out the bottom of the photo, eyes glassy

I am sure. My eyes, don't let him see these wild speeding eyes, 'no sleep, you see' I'll tell him then I'm telling him "Yessir that's me" he didn't think it was, he's onto us all and asks me am I sure, I must explain you see, "That was made while I was in school" it was made when I should have been in school but rather drifting around the state visiting wasting time and thinking of someday going back to school, but my act was clean for dope runs as was Gary's and Ptolemy's but still I feel as though my hair is long and the man detests it for falling in his daughter's face, I think of Carmen and of her dad but the only picture I can get is of the cook at the waffle shop and I'm sure these men are against us.

But now he walks away, calls Joe over and Joe is big, black, looks like maybe he knows the score with nice full mustache and long sideburns, so maybe I have a chance that fades as he studies the laminated photo, walks to me and snarls, "You got any ill-eagle guns or alcohol in this here truck?"

"No sir, no sir" and my mind rhymes on 'just three bags full' then left leg shakes on the clutch up and down and I fear choking the motor, leg's completely out of control, then think shift into neutral inconspicuously don't act stoned just a routine check.

"What's in the back there?" and I tell my tale.

"I'm moving from Indiana and my friends are helping me sir."

"What you moving?" He butts in maliciously but I continue.

"We just rented the truck for the night to finish off the job, been a long night. Furniture's in the back."

Joe says again this time more emphatic, "You ain't got any guns, or alcohol, or drugs anyplace in this truck?" Did he twist and drag the

third item out? I have to piss, jaws clench and won't open for an instant, stutter (do they?) as I answer again. "No sir, not a thing, just furniture," and I add to my story, tell him we're just going back to Jeffersonville, wanted to swear that we were clean. He opens the truck door I nearly jump back in terror and peers inside shining his light on crumpled papers in the floor, on the map on the dashboard, and into each of our faces though the sun light by this time was sufficient for him to see.

He closes the door firmly, steps back a couple of steps, and asks again, "You mean to tell me, son," he looks me in the eyes I stare back, blink, "that if I was to take a mind to search this truck, which you know I can do, I wouldn't find any thing you wouldn't want me to find?"

"Yessir, I mean no sir, just furniture" and I jump out of the cab, surprise the man and myself, hold the door open, grab the key then casually walk to the back of the truck, think, what am I doing? "Here, come take a look" I've said the words and the man laughs, says "Okay," but another calls over, "Let 'em go Joe, I'm ready to go get coffee," and there is the miracle I needed a moment before.

"Okay," Joe calls back, but adds, "Just let me take a quick look in the back at this boy's furniture." He laughs, like at some private joke.

Well I had to do it, acting out of panic trying to force the situation, show my confidence and naw, he won't look. The choice now was clear, open the door and be busted, or? Hell, there was no choice, except get shot in the back running away. It was inevitable, anyway. He would have wanted to see in the back, well, see he would and I open the door and while he studies the wall of tables and chairs I search for stray stalks.

"I declare I love the smell of fresh cut hay," Joe says, and just like that, clucks and walks away, leaving me shaking the rest of the way home.

But still I cannot leave that town. Some force must surely hold me back. With money I could easily drift, but find it just as easy and appealing now to do my drifting in one place. Gary's taken over my job with Ptolemy and from what I hear, has adjusted quite well. They stayed here for a couple of months after the near bust and when they called to say they were going again, I firmly declined to go along.

Sounds, though, sometimes come to my head; usually high pitched bells that go from my left ear to my right and back again, fading in and out as though I were listening to them on ear-phones with the balance being continually adjusted. Voices are rare, but light, nasal breathing has become quite frequent. I also often hear albums in the fan from my furnace, usually groups I used to like, but haven't heard in a long time playing records that are almost familiar.

An occurrence that caused further personal doubt as to whether or not some thing was going wrong in my head came just last week when I decided to go and visit a friend in Parkersboro. I left my room, another basement dwelling still in my favorite neighborhood but closer to the railroad tracks, and the next thing I realized I was 60 miles west of Jeffersonville when I had intended to travel due east on the interstate, my friend living about 30 miles in that direction. I was stunned to realize that I had driven, thinking, surely, but of what I do not know. Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that I was more likely to be losing contact with my mind, and not my mind itself. I reassured myself, for I

ANALYSIS

But still I cannot leave that town. Some force must surely hold me back. With money I could easily drift, but find it just as easy and appealing now to do my drifting in one place. Gary's taken over my job with Ptolemy and from what I hear, has adjusted quite well. They stayed home for a couple of months after the near bust and when they called to say they were going again, I firmly declined to go along.

Sounds, though, sometimes come to my head; usually high pitched bells that go from my left ear to my right and back again, fading in and out as though I were listening to them on ear-phones with the balance being continually adjusted. Voices are rare, but light, nasal breathing has become quite frequent. I also often hear albums in the fan from my furnace, usually groups I used to like, but haven't heard in a long time playing records that are almost familiar.

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really don't believe I could lose it all together; it simply could not just disappear.

And so now I look into my bank account which has dwindled very little and decide that my money would be well spent on catching what was slipping in my mind. The university offers analysis, I was told, and I made my first appointment.

"Come in, come in, sit down, sit down," says the young man with a red van Dyke, red turtle neck and wireless glasses. He looks no older than myself.

"How old are you?" I ask point-blank.

"Twenty-eight. Does that bother you?" he answers as he rubs his hands together.

My first indecision then befalls me and I stare blankly back at his warm smile for several moments before deciding that, forced to make an answer, the less controversial one should be preferred. "No, no. Excuse me."

"That's okay. How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"And you're having problems?"

I quickly debate how smart I should be, for that question did certainly lend itself to sarcastic retort. But I decide that things will work out better if I play it easy, and I do by answering straight-forwardly, "Yes, I think so."

"Well well. Sit down, sit down." He motions to a chair as I step toward the couch, realizing he has already offered me this convenience.

I sit in a plush royal blue easy chair, he sits on the couch and folds his hands neatly in his lap.

The silence of the next few moments is awkward for me as he glances at a clip board I figure to be my personal data sheet.

"So you went to school here?"

"Yes." I light a cigarette and he leaps up, dropping the clip board, and steps hurriedly across the room to his desk where he grabs an ash tray and returns it to me.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, no. Not at all. We had an ashtray on a little wooden stand I used to keep by that chair but a patient kicked it over."

"I didn't realize you called us patients. At least not to our faces."

"Does that bother you?"

I suspected that it did, but decided to let it go for now. "No."

"You didn't graduate?"

"No."

"What did you study?"

"Never got a major. Drama, anthropology and U.S. history, mostly, and a little lit. But I didn't really study. 'Swhy I dropped out."

"Oh. I see, I see." He pulls a pencil from his jacket and marks on the clipboard. "And you're working where? We have a blank here."

"Me too."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm a blank there, too."

"You're not working?" and as I nodded my head he followed with, "You are working?"

"No, I'm not working."

"Forgive me, but the paper work must be done. I do despise it, I guess you can tell because I'm not so comfortable with these sort of questions." As an afterthought, he adds, "Besides, we usually write 'unemployed' in the blank when we're not working, rather than leaving the blank blank, which tends to suggest that we might have overlooked the question."

"Sorry. We usually leave blanks blank when they don't relate to us."

He glances uncertainly at me before continuing, "And your parents?"

"I didn't see that one."

"It's not on here. Just for my information."

"Moved west. While I was in school. I've got the money, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh no, oh no, goodness no. Just wondering, that's all." He gives a little chuckle as he says, "Why, that is all, for today anyway, all the paper work and all our time."

After several more sessions, he decided I should quit drugs, which I had virtually done anyway. I must have led him to believe otherwise but didn't have the heart to tell him, so I agreed with some hesitation in order to make him feel as though he were actually prescribing something. I suspected that he was very new to his field and could easily see why he was still working with university cases, charity and students. Except for a hint that I shouldn't drink much beer, that was it for his recommendations. But at the next session he launched into another area when he

suggested that I get out with people more, that I try to converse, with strangers if necessary, since I told him all my friends had moved away. That I promised to do.

Since the strangers around Jeffersonville didn't particularly fascinate me, I decided to drive over to the Outer Banks for a long weekend. After a night of walking the beaches, though, I was ready to come back, having met practically no one who seemed in the least bit eager for some good conversation. The ferry was even deserted, but I was able to develop a fairly good rapport with the sea gulls by feeding them a couple of loaves of bread. Three children came up and were helping me when their parents spotted them and quickly called them away. The only thing close to a conversation I had came at a service station somewhere in the eastern part of North Carolina near a town called Conetoe.

"The bathroom," said the attendant, "is around back."

I tracked through rainbow puddles of gas and oil and water, onto a gravel path by a refuge for junk auto parts, stepped quickly to keep the oily water out of my sandals and thus was looking down so that I nearly collided with a little girl eating a popsicle. She stood, with her back to me, studying a scab on her elbow.

"Watch it," I gasped as she tilted her elbow far enough to make the runny popsicle slide off onto the front of her dress.

"That's okay, mister. It wasn't any good," she said as she stepped out of my way.

An old lady, short and sweating, fanning herself with a hanky, stood between the doors to the restrooms when I got to the back of the station.

"Hello," she spoke as she glanced quickly at me and then back to the ground.

"Hey," I replied as I reached for the door marked 'gents.'

She quickly rasped, "There's someone in there."

"Oh. Thanks." I retreated to stand beside her, suddenly conscious of the sound of tinkling water.

"Was that your little girl around there?" I asked, though I knew it couldn't be.

"No. My sister's. She's in there, and her husband's in there," she said as she pointed to the two respective doors. Again she glanced my way for an instant, then returned her gaze to the ground, breathing, it seemed, somewhat harder. She dabbed at the corner of her mouth with the hanky and adjusted her hat, a wide-brimmed floppy straw one with a small cluster of grapes to one side.

"Are you from here?" I decided that if that didn't get any conversation going, I'd stop trying.

"Oh no. We've been to the beach for the weekend. My sister and her little girl, she's separated, my sister, not her little girl, and he followed us." Again she pointed to the bathroom door as she whispered the last of that sentence. "We're from Georgia."

"Do you work there? In Georgia?"

"Oh yes. I work there. In Georgia." She adjusted her palmetto print dress, pulling it around and wiggling her hips slightly and I noticed that her hose had twisted, too. She looked like my first grade teacher after she'd had tuberculosis for half the term and then come back in one day to say hello.

"What do you do?"

"Pardon?" Her head jerked back like a chicken that had tasted shot.

"In Georgia. What do you do?" I regretted asking the question just an instant after I had thought it.

"Lung sucker. If you must know," she said haughtily.

"Ma'am?" It was my turn to be startled.

"I'm a lung sucker. That's what I said. A dad-blamed lung sucker." Her hard stare forced my eyes to the ground.

"Oh."

"Don't suppose you know what a lung sucker is, do you?" she asked in what I thought to be an abruptly coy manner.

"No, ma'am."

After a pause of several moments, I feared she wasn't going to tell me, but finally she asked, "Don't you wanna know?"

"Oh, sure, ma'am. I just didn't know if you wanted to talk about it," I assured her.

"Well, everybody seems to ask, and no one seems to know, so I guess I'm kinder used to it by now. Been doin it thirty-odd years. But what I do, is I take a little tube and stick it down a chicken's throat and press a button. Pow! Just like that his lungs is gone." She smiled triumphantly as her sister and her husband simultaneously emerged from the restrooms.

"I been talkin to this nice gentleman," she said to her sister, turning her shoulder to the man. I nodded the them both, said, "Nice talking to you," and excused myself to the bathroom.

I wondered on the way home what sort of reaction she would get from a creditor as he studied her application for a loan and saw that she sucked lungs, and then wished I'd had the chance to ask how the job was done before automation.

After it became apparent I was going to be unable to enter into any sort of stimulating and mind-saving conversations in Jeffersonville, Tod, my analyst, made the suggestion that perhaps I really should consider a semi-permanent move, a constant change of environment. Again, when he suggested Mason City, I didn't say I'd been planning on moving there for well over a year, just told him that was alright with me. It was the day after that decision-making session that I had gone downtown to see a movie, a mafia flick I'd heard was bad, which it was, and had just stepped out into the twi-light when I saw Carmen. I didn't think she'd seen me, so I turned to study the bill board announcing coming attractions. Then I heard her call, "Leslie?"

I turned to face her because I knew nothing else to do. "Hey, how's it going?" She looked very good and very happy, smiling.

"Didn't you see me? Didn't you want to speak?"

"No, no. I kind of thought the feelings might be reversed. You know. So how's it going?" I glanced at her eyes, but couldn't hold my gaze there.

"Alright. Fine. And you?"

"You know. The same I guess. Passing time." I smiled at that one, and she laughed.

"Oh yes, Leslie. You're very good at that. Perhaps the best."

We both were silent then for a moment and I felt as though she were ready to leave, so quickly spoke, "I hear you quit the waffle shop," though it had been over a year since she'd been there, and added, "You must have finished school by now."

"I transferred, Leslie. And lost some credits. So I still have a semester to go. I'm staying in Mason City now, with my folks. It's not as bad as I thought it would be."

That one stunned me and she must have noticed because she asked if something was wrong. I started to tell her I'd been thinking of moving there, but changed my mind and simply said, "No. Nothing. Just thinking."

"Oh, Leslie," she grabbed my hands and lifted her shoulders as she took a deep breath. "Leslie, I've got to go. What's your address now? Maybe I'll write, but I've got to go."

I told her quickly; she said it once to herself and walked away.